The Oval

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Flipsky's Serenade

Lili Casteel

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"Mom and Dad? They're studying back east in Massachusetts. Boston. Getting their second doctorates, like they need more school. Yeah, at the University of Harvard. Or MIT." Mickey runs a hand through his hair. Clean hair, no dandruff. The words make sense grammatically—socially, too. He rehearses in the mirror. He stands old and looks tall. The words must make sense.

The parents who said they would come back had not come back. Months? Years? Two months and twenty-four days.

When the parents left, the mirror was new—plastic film covered the glass. Now the film is gone. Finger and lip prints paint the pane.

Mickey picks his sister up from kindergarten daily. Kindergarteners don't study. But they do act.

It is temporary: stacks of water bottles pile in the living room. The shower rusted closed and the sink refuses to spit out water.

The basement is cold.

"Yeah, that's where they're at, what they're doing. Mom studies the anatomy of the Astrolopithican Wasp. She thought about taking up the Horolopithican wasp, but its legs only have two joints—Astrolopithicans have three." The mirror is on the rug and those are the only things in the basement. The basement is larger than the upstairs.

"Dad's observing the effects Chopin's *Nocturnes* have on people—depending on day or night. His night starts at 4:30pm, and his day starts at 6:00am. He's looking to know which time releases the most dopamine. Between you and me," Mickey whispers to the mirror, "it seems like he's favoring nighttime. That's one thing Maribel and I got from our parents. We study, study, study. She is never all that excited about it, but give her a sketchbook and she'll be at it for hours." Young adults with kids don't study—mirrors are lie-proof.

When would the parents who said they'd be back, be back?

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"Mickey, it's so nice to see you," Mrs. Kinder says. She's a middle-aged woman who looks like a young middle-aged woman. Dyed hair does that. So does a prescription for "Wrinkle Free America." She never asks after their parents. She schedules Mickey for parent-teacher conferences.

Maribel's kindergarten has blue carpet on the walls and some on the ceiling. The vacuum doesn't reach the ceiling. A TV plays loud, primary-color-loving kids' shows. They don't have a TV at home. TVs eat electricity like hounds. The black-outs come and go as Mickey's work schedule changes. It changes often. 3 a.m. to 7 a.m. shrank to 5 to 7. Boxes of broken crayons and markers with crushed felt litter the floor.

"It's great to see you too, Mrs. Kinder." They hug, too long. Her arms creep low, eyes dewy, and lips plump. Small creases line her tear ducts.

Maribel's kindergarten is close to their apartment complex. A car gets there in ten minutes. The bus normally takes twenty. Bike is a different story. Especially the flat-tired, rusty-chained one Mickey rides. One hour and sixteen minutes. Mrs. Kinder stays late.

"Have you been well?" She hesitates on the "well," not a word often used. Her phone dings.

All the other kids are gone, picked up by mothers and fathers hours earlier. Those families with their 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. schedules. Maribel brushes a Barbie's hair. Criss-cross applesauce. She drools on Barbie and cuts all of Barbie's hair without scissors—strand by strand. She does not notice him.

"Yes," Mickey says.

No, I feel ill. Like plastic.

Mrs. Kinder grabs his shoulder, sincerely and longingly. A motherly gesture short of all things motherly.

"Job's going great. I'll be making more than you here pretty soon." They both laugh. Her teeth are dull and the front two are crooked. The phone dings again. A flip phone with buttons larger than both of his thumbs. Cracked, red nail polish cakes her chewed-on nails. The stubs squeeze his skin.

It's like you planted a seed. Someone special promised the seed would sprout vegetables or fruit. They don't know the specifics. You want to know the specifics. That want turns into need. The seed becomes your life. That someone special promises it will sprout in a few days.

"That's where Maribel gets her humor." Mrs. Kinder leans in close to whisper. "She's quite a class clown, you know."

So you water it every time it needs water. You buy fluoride-free water and BPA-free water-spouts. After it sprouts, that someone special told you it will bloom.

"Uh oh, I'd better talk to her. I was never a class clown," he says. She laughs and does not smell nice—sweet cigars mixed with two-day-old deodorant. Maribel picks through the last of Barbie's hair. Plastic blonde strands stick to his sister's shirt, to her hair.

You didn't plant the seed that deep or pour the dirt too high. You can't see the seed or the sprout. A week trudges by. Nothing happens. You contemplate touching it, but what if it's rare and doesn't grow once touched? What if it's the last of its species and you become responsible for an entire species' extinction? So you wait. But you know—it will never sprout.

"My goodness, Mickey. You ever thought about becoming a comedian?" Her hand clasps to Mickey's. "You know, I'm quite funny. I can stay late and tutor you if you'd like." The dinging phone is now the ringing phone. Mrs. Kinder makes no attempt to take the call.

But it does sprout. And you breathe fast and everything feels like it will be all right, and you look up the shape of the leaves in your sprout book but can't figure out if it is the suicide palm from Madagascar or the Western Underground Orchid from Australia.

"No, no. I can't ask you to do that." He steps back. "And I'm not that funny. I have to work. Or go to school. Late. Usually late. And Maribel has quite the bedtime routine." Maribel looks up. She runs over to grab his leg and Barbie's hair falls onto the carpet. She wears a yellow polka-dot dress with black Mary Janes. A mother would pick out that outfit. A mother did not pick out that outfit. Maribel barks at his feet.

You never find out. It stays as the center of your world's excitement, you walk in the door and look at the plant, water the plant, think about this miserable mystery. This obsession that you know is ridiculous. But you obsess. You don't touch. You wait.

"I hear you've been quite a clown, little Maribel." She whimpers, lies on the carpet, and pretends to be a mastiff or Border collie. Whatever her dog of the day is. "I think she's the real comedian, Mrs. Kinder," he whispers, licking his lips and squeezing Maribel's hand. "Well, it's time

for us to get our butts home."

You finally decide to touch it. You find out that it's not the Western Underground Orchid because it doesn't have a millimeter deep crease in the leaf. It isn't the suicide palm of Madagascar because it has roots, not bulbs. It's not either of the plants it's supposed to be. And you touch and feel it more and can't believe it.

Mrs. Kinder's phone rings again. She listens and then asks, "Where are your parents?"

The leaves are plastic. The seed has sprouted plastic. It will never grow.

"Let's go, Maribel." Mickey lets go of Mrs. Kinder. She smiles with chapped teeth and crooked lips. Maribel grabs her backpack.

It felt too ill.

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"Oh, this week they're over in France. They've been there for a few months. Mom always wanted to be a princess." Mickey's armpits sweat. Maribel holds her nose.

The mirror moved to the living room.

Mickey moves a single lamp room to room. The other lightbulbs are dead. Once the power goes out, they'll have to get used to candles.

He checks the phonebooks. The local one and the statewide. Maribel scans the "M"s, he scans the "Y"s. Some motherly and fatherly figures stand out, but not their mother or father. He calls the electrical companies. The receptionists know him. Their sentences are short.

"The French give money to people who want to rebuild castles. It promotes tourism or something. Our folks found a cheap château on the edge of Porte de Ville. Belonged to Jeanne D'Arc. Marcel Proust nabbed it a few years later.

"Mom's convinced they haunt the place. D'Arc in the fireplace and Proust in their bed," Mickey says. "We'll head over in a few months, once we learn French. Just bought a French/English dictionary." Only appliance manuals (stove, fridge, half the pages for the washer—no dryer) and phone books dot his bookshelf.

"It might take us a few months."

The mother and father who said they'd be back are not coming back. Five months and thirteen days.

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"Howdy ho, young neighbors!" Mr. Rednik dresses up as Santa Claus every Christmas for the kids. He does not have kids. "I'm glad you guys could make it. My wifey makes a mean lasagna—and I don't just mean mean-looking!" He slaps his knees, right then left.

The potluck was meant to be outside, but it rained. The people of the apartment complex decide to crush into the Redniks' apartment—number 305. It is a cluttered space. The living room and bathroom smell like Mrs. Rednik, who smells like bacon grease. Both of their surnames were Rednik before the marriage. They insist it is coincidence and tell others they are only related by love.

Mr. Rednik cooks pork chops that he promises are not dry but are dry. His nose is red and it isn't from drinking.

"We wouldn't dream of missing it," Mickey says, nudging Maribel in the side.

"We brought chips," she says. Mickey hands him a wrinkled bag.

"Oh, thank you, dearie." He pats Maribel's curls before she runs and hides behind Mickey's legs. Mrs. Rednik works for minimum wage at a Mexican restaurant that charges for chips but never asks if you'd like chips. They always bring chips. Mr. Rednik talks about wars and boasts about his heritage (Russian, French, Cherokee, early Japanese), though he has never done anything notable.

The room is loud. A plastic table holds wholesale trays of dried cheese and the lasagna, too overcooked around the edges to chew. A man larger than Mr. Rednik leans against it.

"How have you two been? How are your mom and dad?" he says.

"Oh, we've been great," Mickey says. "Really great, wonderful really."

Not all that great. I feel numb, like I'm burning from the inside.

"Mommy and daddy aren't here," Maribel whispers behind Mickey's legs. The fat man's cheeks flush red.

It's like I fill four pots with water and add some salt because I'm having a dinner party, a big dinner party with at least twenty people, and I want the food to cook faster. So I put the four pots on the four burners.

"You two are home alone? Where are they? I thought they'd be back by now." Mr. Rednik's scarlet nose is full of blackheads. "Do you need something? We can help."

And the salt makes the water boil faster than you expected. You didn't want dinner that fast, so you turn the stove off and you join your guests, give it fifteen minutes or so. You have time.

"They're—" Maribel starts, no longer a whisper. The fat man puts more weight against the table with his comfort-fit, elastic waist jeans. The table creaks.

"Oh, they're just at the store," Mickey says. "They got back a few days ago. Restocking the house and all that. This one," he pats Maribel's head a little too hard, "eats two or more tablefuls a day." The table leans, cheese starts to slip.

You check on the pots and the stove is off. You make sure. But the water is still boiling. Fifteen minutes later. The people in your living room are now impatient and they start yelling. But you don't want to put the pasta in because it might over-cook or boil too hard and spill over the pot. The water keeps boiling. And they keep yelling.

"Okay, if you say so, Mickey." He claps. "Go and get yourself some food. But not two tablefuls, you hear, missy?" Maribel says nothing.

The fat man pushes away from the table. The cheese stops sliding. His shirt has pit stains, back stains, and even chest stains.

I haven't been great. We haven't been great.

Maribel shovels some cheese. The dry parts crunch.
The fat man walks out the door.

I'm numb on the outside, and the pots won't stop boiling.

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The power is out. The mailbox is full—angry warnings for this and that service. An eviction notice stapled to the door. The mirror is cracked.

Where were the parents who said they'd be back? Nine months and forty-six days.

The rug frays, spindles of thread catch in the slivered wood. If they were here the rug would be sewed, the lights would be on, and the mirror would not be cracked.

"They're up in Canada. I think Calgary," he says. "Yep, that's where they are this month. Sounds good. Dad's helping with some oil company. The one with the dinosaur. Mom is probably doing the same.

They don't call us much, but I'm sure they'll bring us up soon. I know they'll bring us up soon. Mom says it's too cold for Maribel up there. She has water-resistant boots, but not water-proof." The mirror stands old and looks weak. "We'll buy some next pay check," Mickey says.

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The grocery check-out line is short. They are next, not another person behind them. Maribel drools at the candy but has never asked for one.

The cashier smiles. She is the same from last week and the week before. Their food is the same. Quick sale items: cheese sticks aching to grow mold, milk that may be sour within the day.

"Hey, Marty." She is a young woman. She grabs the milk and cheese. "Hey, Marybeth. Dang, it's been a week already, huh? You've grown at least a foot." She said the same last week. A lady with blond hair joins the line.

"So how have you two been? Beautiful day, yeah?" She gives Maribel her weekly sticker, a lousily drawn dog next to a lousier drawn cat. The blonde lady picks at the candy rack.

"Yes, very pretty out." Mickey puts the groceries in bags.

"Very pretty," says Maribel.

But I've been pretty lousy. We've been pretty lousy.

"But we haven't been doing great," Mickey says. The cashier looks up. Her practiced formality slinks away. Her hair looks greasy and smells like hairspray. The blonde lady in line chooses her candy.

"I feel odd. Kind of like this time my mom and dad bought Maribel a Barbie. Her first Barbie, actually." Maribel's hair is greasy and does not smell of hairspray. "So they bought her this damned Barbie even though I told them that she hated Barbies. She screamed and cried, so what's a big brother to do? I took the Barbie and fixed it up, made it look as un-Barbie-like as I could." Maribel looks at the candy rack. A small, pudgy older man gets in line.

"Okay, that'll be $22.07." The cashier holds out her hand. They pay in small bills and coins.

"I used to cut Maribel's hair really nice. Bangs straight across but a bit shorter than they are now. She loved it. Looked at every mirror she could catch. She wanted her Barbie's hair the same way." The blond lady taps her foot. "So I cut the Barbie's hair to look like Maribel's. And you should have seen her face. She was so happy. She said she liked Barbies after that." Another lady gets in line, a squat redhead with a pack of gum.

"Mark, there are people in line. Let's talk later." The cashier continues to hold out her hand. Mickey sets a few dollars down and pulls a bag of coins from his pocket.

"But eventually, she gets sick of that haircut. Her hair grows and the doll's doesn't. She cries and cries—your parents leave for the night because she cries. Why didn't I tell her Barbie's hair doesn't grow back? You know? It would've made so much—"

"Hey, asshole. Save it for another time," a man four people behind them yells. There are now six people in line.

"So this little girl hates me. My own sister hates me."

The lady with the blonde hair mumbles, "Jerk-off." It's louder than a mumble. "And she takes the scissors to the bathroom and locks the door and cries. And I sit outside the door and beg her to come out, beg her to at least give me the scissors."

Mickey dumps the coin bag out. Pennies roll from the counter to the ground. All pennies.

"And there you have it," he says. The cashier's expression does not change but she picks up the coins—one by one. "Maribel, pick out some candy."

"Really?"

"Of course. But be fast. We have quite the line." The red-headed woman plays on her phone. The pudgy boy-man flips Mickey off under his coat while looking at the ground.

"She eventually comes out of the bathroom and says sorry and sorry and cries and hugs me and almost all her hair is gone and the hair makes a trail around the house. I sweep it up that night, the lights turn on and the water's hot so I make some pasta. But the front door doesn't open. The parents never come home and we wonder why. The parents who said they'd come back never came back," Mickey says. •